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Mr. Laird's Residual Forces

A week after President Nixon told the nation that "the American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end" and that his goal is "total American withdrawal from Vietnam," Defense Secretary Laird has indicated that United States ships and planes will remain in Southeast Asia indefinitely as "part of the realistic deterrent which we will maintain in Asia."

Mr. Laird's remarks do not necessarily contradict the President's words, but the credibility of Mr. Nixon's assurances will be seriously in doubt as long as the Administration fails to clarify the mission of any residual force. The Defense Secretary declined to rule out the use of holdover naval and air units in Vietnam. He left it far from certain that there would be no residual ground force in South Vietnam, though any such possibility would seem a direct contradiction of the Presidential promise.

Apart from these extremely troublesome obscurities, the Laird comments raise doubts about how much, if anything, the Pentagon has learned from the Vietnam war and the recent incursion into Laos.

All the operations in Indochina have created serious questions about the ability of air and sea power to deter a determined indigenous foe in the kind of guerrilla conflict that has prevailed. On that basis, it is not clear how "realistic" a deterrent would be represented by the air and sea forces the Defense Secretary proposes to maintain on a long-term basis in Southeast Asia.

Beyond such practical considerations, serious moral and legal questions would be raised by any continuing air war in Indochina. There is growing evidence and awareness that United States bombing and strafing missions in Indochina have caused widespread death and hardship among civilians, contravening the rules of war and the dictates of conscience.

The nation is entitled to a more explicit definition of the Administration's plans for any residual forces in Southeast Asia. In the light of the President's commitment to total withdrawal from Vietnam, there can be no excuse for ambiguities which only serve to keep alive the suspicion that the American involvement there may continue indefinitely.